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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 DJIBOUTI 001674

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SUBJECT: DJIBOUTI: UNITED DONOR CONCERN ABOUT EXPULSIONS

REF: DJIBOUTI 1633

1. Summary: Donors (France, EU, U.S., UN agencies) met September 11 to discuss the immediate problems surrounding a makeshift transit center near the Ethiopian border and likely impending problems attendant on forcible deportations that are to begin September 15. Donors agreed to try to present a united front with the Djiboutian government, in order to forestall its capitalizing on its own ill-advised expulsion policy and poor preparation to install another refugee camp cum donor-aid pump. End summary.

2. Following up on ref demarche dissociating the U.S. from Djibouti's expulsions of foreigners, we prompted UNDP chief (UN resrep) in Djibouti, Mbaranga Gasarabwe, to host an unprecedented round-table donors' meeting on September 11. The meeting was attended by the representatives of UNHCR, WFP, UNICEF, and WHO, the French ambassador and counsellor, the EU representative, the U.S. Charge d'affaires, USAID representative, ADCM, and poloff. The focus of the meeting was the Djibouti government's on-going expulsions of undocumented foreigners and consequent problems emerging from the newly-established "transit center" at Aouraoussa near the Ethiopian border in the district of Ali Sabieh.

3. UNHCR representative Collins Asare outlined the situation in Aouraoussa. After the expulsion policy had been announced on July 26 and with little advance notice from the Djibouti government, UNHCR committed in mid-August to refurbishing this Mengistu-era transit center, which had fallen into disuse, to screen some 2500 asylum seekers whom it had registered in recent years. Toward the end of August, the government gave UNHCR representatives 36 hours' notice of implementation of a plan to move asylum seekers from Djibouti city to Aouraoussa. On August 28 UNHCR staff found themselves surrounded by at least 10,000 people claiming asylum at the debarkation point in Djibouti city (a soccer stadium). Citing concern that the crowd would become unruly, Djibouti authorities transported the entire group to the Aouraoussa transit center, which was prepared to handle 3,000 people. There arose numerous problems with security, logistics, and feeding. At present, UN representatives said that the primary concern was water. WFP had committed to feeding the 12,000-15,000 people currently in the vicinity of the camp on a temporary basis, from its food stocks earmarked for the Djiboutian Food-for-Work and School-Feeding programs.

4. The UNHCR representative said that of the 12,000-15,000 people at Aouraoussa, 2,500 (largely Oromo) were registered asylum seekers with UNHCR. Approximately 5,000 people, he estimated on the basis of initial screening, were nonregistered southern Somalis who might have a claim to refugee status. The remainder were nonregistered Somalilanders and Ethiopians, with a few others such as Eritreans, who would have little claim to refugee status. He pointed out that UNHCR was suffering acute budgetary and human-resources constraints to cope with this influx of people, a significant portion of whom fell outside its purview. He pointed out that the Djibouti governmental entity in charge of refugees was pressing for construction of permanent lodging and facilities at Aouraoussa.

5. The French ambassador expressed particular concern about the possible worsening of the situation in the coming days, with the ending of the "grace period" for voluntary departure of undocumented foreigners. (The period was extended from August 31 to September 15 by the Minister of Interior, who declared that under no conditions would it be further extended.) The U.S. Charge d'affaires reviewed for the round table his demarche on the Minister of Interior September 3 (reftel) and subsequent press guidance dissociating the U.S. from the expulsions and putting the government of Djibouti on notice in regard to human rights violations. Discussants noted that several international journalists had indicated that they would be arriving in Djibouti in the coming days to cover the expulsions. There was general agreement that the government of Djibouti would try to pass the blame for any future humanitarian crisis resulting from chaotic conditions at Aouraoussa or from forcible expulsions in coming weeks on to the international community. All concurred that it would be important to provide a united front toward the Djibouti government to ensure that it accepted responsibility for a policy for which it alone was responsible. It was agreed that the round table would reconvene September 16 to refine a concerted strategy.

16. Comment: The Djibouti government would like to capitalize on its own self-inflicted policy of expulsions, its own lack of minimal preparation, and donors' reluctance to permit suffering among a large undocumented population now on the move, to corner donors into creating yet another refugee camp, i.e., source of donor aid, on its borders.  
SMITH